

CRUELITIES OF THE AMAZON RUBBER HUNTERS

Men Back From Putumayo Region Corroborate Sir Roger Casement's Report of Atrocities on Natives—Indians Maimed, Poisoned or Murdered by Overseers—Conditions Which Peru Must Reform

MORE evidence concerning the horrors that mark the rubber gathering industry in the upper Amazon region within the Peruvian border has been secured by a Sun reporter in this city. It is supplied by men who have recently returned from that region, and it corroborates the statements made by Sir Roger Casement which were printed in THE SUN last Sunday.

The report of conditions in the rubber producing districts made after a two years careful investigation by the British commissioner, Sir Roger Casement, has attracted the attention of two Governments, that of Great Britain and that of the United States of America, and going on the findings of the Casement report both Governments have made representations to Peru demanding that the atrocities cease. Sir Roger reported that worse conditions exist in South America than those which caused horror throughout the civilized world in the Congo. The statements made by men now in this city bear out the Casement report in its tale of cruelty, maiming and actual murder of natives that the rubber yield may bring in golden returns to the commercial companies operating as concessionaires.

To get a fair estimate of the conditions under which rubber is produced it is necessary to have a clear idea not only of the region where the milk of the rubber trees is collected but also of the climate, of the natives and of the freedom from restraint, legal or moral, which living in so remote a region engenders.

Peru's situation in the matter is peculiar. The Putumayo district can be reached from Lima only by weeks of travel around by Panama and up the Amazon, while the district itself is under the slightest of government authority. There is practically no restraint from the law and a man may be flogged, maimed, poisoned or shot with absolute impunity as regards government officials.

It has been estimated that a ton of raw rubber represents the life of a man. This is not entirely due to the cruelty of the boss collector, as he is called. Thousands of deaths occur annually from disease, snake bite, crushing by the immense reptiles that infest the water and swamps of the upper Amazon, some of these constrictors being more than fifty feet long, and not a few from the ignorance of the natives, who neglect the commonest hygienic regulations of civilization.

The immediate cause of the cruelty exercised by the boss collectors on the natives are plain enough. The natives are lazy. There is a great amount of the sleeping sickness prevalent in these regions. There is a certain amount of danger involved in a trip through the rubber trees. For all these reasons if a native has enough food on hand to last him through the day he is naturally averse to going cupping after the rubber.

On the other hand the boss collector has to supply his contracted amount to the mercantile company, for the ships can make the extreme headwaters only while the overflow season is on, and that is during a very few months of the year.

It must be stated that a more provoking set of operatives than the low caste native could hardly be imagined. They will work only when driven to it by starvation or coercive measures; they are careless in the way they do their work; they spill the precious milk which will subsequently be coagulated into the rubber of commerce; they gash the trees instead of making the proper cut which gets the best results and they frequently will cut down a whole tree rather than take the trouble to cut it properly.

Indeed it was not until the poison penalty was imposed that this felling of trees could be stopped. Even the dull brain of the native could make some connection between the sudden, agonized death of some operative and the fact that he had persistently violated the rule against felling a rubber tree. According to one traveler in the section after a consultation of some of the natives a test was made to establish the existence of that connection.

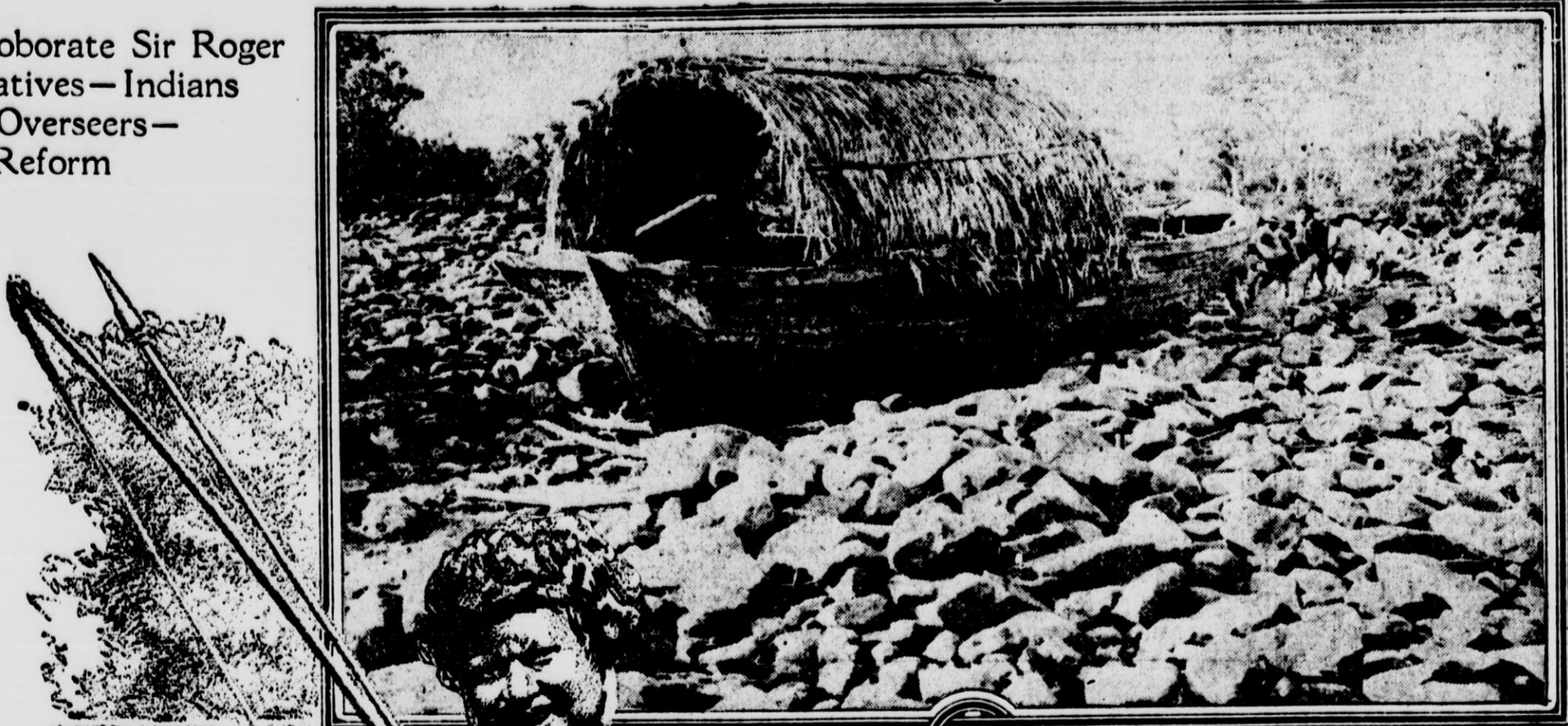
A native felled a tree, but on returning to headquarters he ate no supper, being supplied with food by some of his fellow operatives in secret. He did not die; but one of the more or less domestic animals about the camp to which he had thrown his own suspected supper came to a sudden end. The next day he felled another tree, but he never sat down to supper, for the collector, learning what he had done, shot him as he entered the camp.

There are sub-collectors who rank as section bosses and who follow the men about on their rounds and are armed with scourge and machete. On one occasion in the absolute knowledge of the person with whom THE SUN reporter was talking a sub-collector found a man cutting more deeply than he should into the rubber tree. He struck him on the side of the face with the flat of the machete and broke the man's jaw, leaving him with the remark:

"Don't cut so deep next time." The day's tour of the natives who cup the trees is not a pleasant one. They start out in the morning with forty or fifty tin cups slung over their shoulders and are obliged to wade sometimes waist or breast deep in mud and ooze and slime. They must be constantly alert for cobras and venomous snakes, which infest the waters, to say nothing of several species of saguaris whose sharp teeth can perform instantaneous amputation of legs or arms.

On reaching the rubber trees they make a V-shaped cut in the rough outer bark. At the inverted apex of the angle thus made the tin cup is fastened with a piece of gum, and the operation is repeated from ten to forty times on the same tree. A day's work consists in the care of a hundred such trees for each man.

After the cupping expedition in the evening, and during certain seasons of the year at noon as well, a tour is made with a large pan or jug or jar into which the milk collected in the cups is poured. It is not an easy job, like tapping a sugar maple, where one incision will supply sap for several days. Owing to the tropical growth the cut heals rapidly and is



Typical Portage in the Rubber Country.

peculiar process of nature when the air strikes that part of the nut which was broken from the parent stem there is an explosion of the nut with a sound like the cracking of a pistol. The outer covering falls off and three capsules containing the life germ of the tree are thrown in various directions.

The rubber from the *Hevea* is commercially known as up river rubber and is usually quoted at double the price of the inferior grades. It is not only in quality of the product but in quantity that the *Hevea* is superior to other rubber producing trees, and this makes it sought after, even though the collecting is attended with the hardships and consequent atrocities that are now under investigation. The *Hevea* throws fully 25 per cent. more rubber than any other tree.

This variety is found only in Amazonia and the trade is principally in the hands of native business men or Portuguese merchants. There is a very extensive transportation interest which until recently has been in the control of an English steamship company. Within a short time a new line controlled by Germans is sending steamships up as far as Manaus, near the headwaters of the Amazon.

The extent of this business is surprising. Rubber is second only to coffee and sugar as a tropical product. The United States consumes one-half of the total output; the annual importations from Brazil are worth \$70,000,000 and from Peru \$12,000,000.

In reaching the rubber districts by way of the Atlantic side one must sail for many days yet at this it is the easier way of approach. Entering at the mouth of the Amazon the vessels to the upper waters take the branch known as the Para. This is formed by the bisection of the mouth of the Amazon by the large island of Marajo, together with others which form a very considerable archipelago. The southern line of the fork thus made is the Para River.

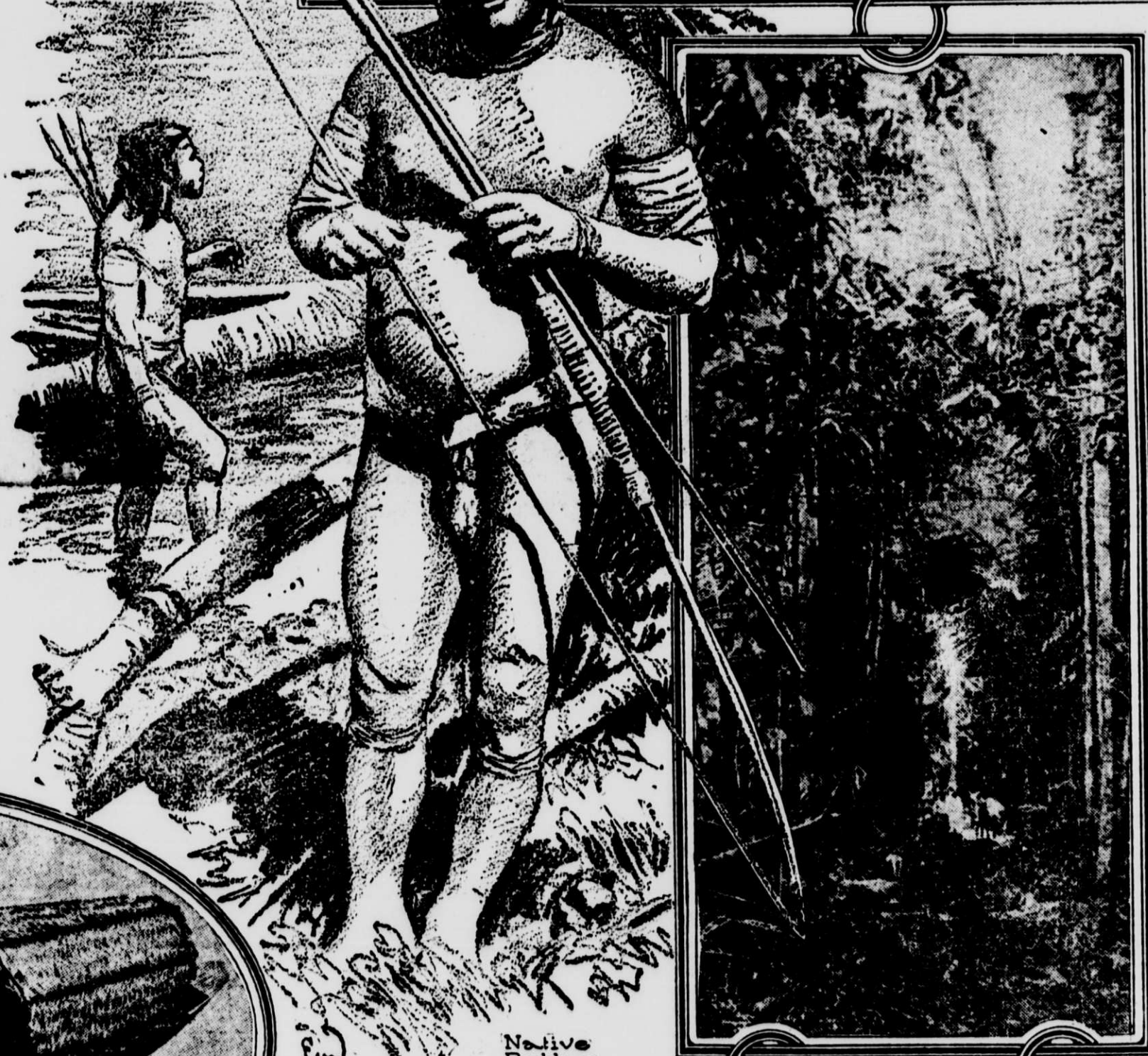
This is so wide, although it is but part of the mouth of the Amazon, that only one bank may be seen at one time, unless in remarkably clear weather, until it narrows when almost at the city of Para. This is reached after a twelve hours sail from the mouth of the Amazon.

A very peculiar custom prevails among the Campos natives. They insist upon catching every insect which bites them and eating it immediately. This is to prevent the insect from carrying away any part of the blood or flesh and the victim being thus incomplete by the loss. When a member of the tribe dies he is cremated and his ashes are mixed with a native wine and the mixture is consumed by the chiefs of the tribe. Thus the group, they believe, has suffered no loss. The claim is that the dead man has been reabsorbed into the tribe. They are friendly to white men if the latter come properly accredited.

Incited by the boss rubber collectors they are suspicious of strangers with no particular business. Their native weapon is bow and arrow, but the rubber companies operating under concessions have supplied them with rifles and ammunition. Their instructions are to shoot at sight and ask questions afterward if any one not employed by their bosses is seen in the rubber sections.

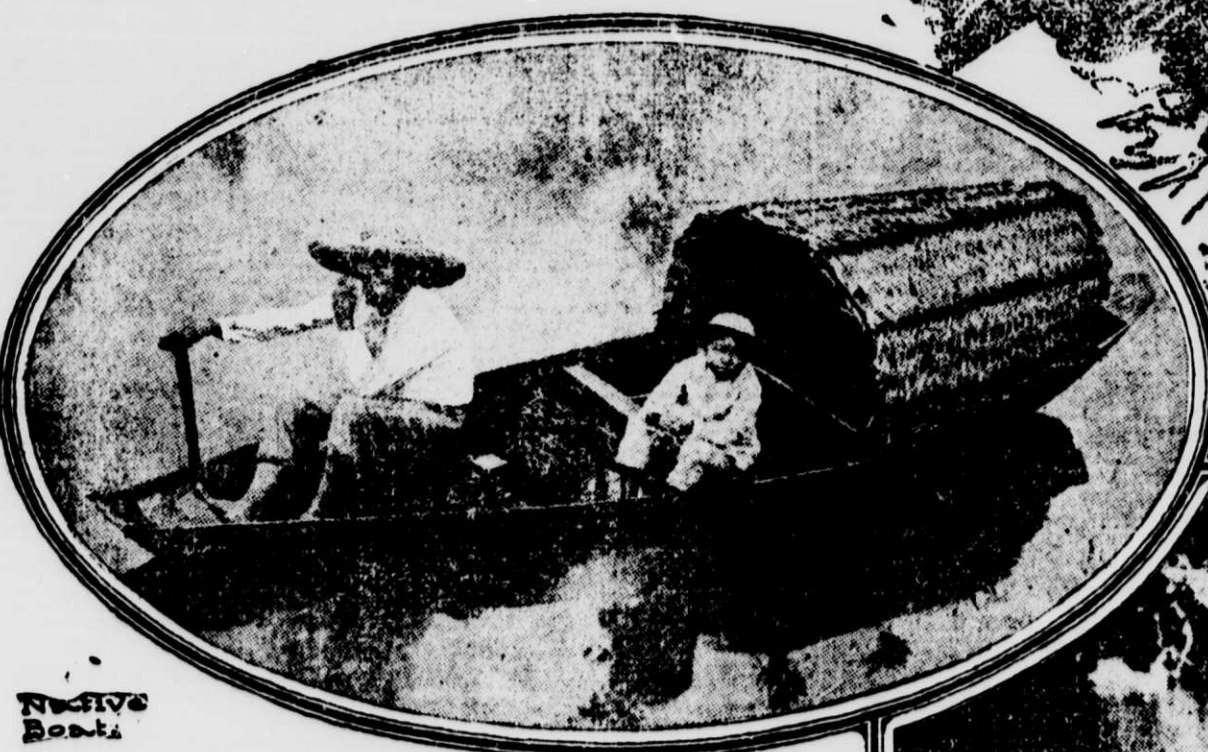
Human life is cheap there; lawlessness is the only thing which may be considered the characteristic of all, and in such a condition of affairs, where might is the only right, it is not strange that things should go on which when being discovered should shock civilization. The Casement report has been an eye opener to the civilized world, and if Washington and the British Foreign Office can accomplish it the Government of Peru will take immediate steps to secure relief. Indeed, the latter Government has promised to correct the abuses, and the State Department is waiting to hear that active measures have been taken.

Sir Robert Casement, who made the investigation for the British Foreign Office and upon whose report both his own and the American Government acted, was the commissioner who investigated conditions in the Congo several years ago. Great Britain is interested because the largest concessionaire is a corporation chartered by the home Government, and the nation is smarting under the criticisms which have been made. America is interested as the largest consumer of the product. For the present both nations are waiting upon Peru to reform existing conditions.



Native Rubber Collector

In the Heart of the Rubber Country.



Native Boat



Rubber Transport Canoe.

and every day counts in the collection. Coercive measures, therefore, are resorted to to keep the native on his rounds. Machetes are very much in evidence, as they are used for slashing the outer bark to make incisions for the milk to escape. The boss collector finds a machete handler than a walking stick in coercing a native.

If a native is delinquent the boss collector may strike him with a machete as with a stick. In such a case the loss of an ear or a limb may be the result. In not a few instances persistent refusal on the part of a native to work has caused him to be killed outright. The man is simply shot down.

Gun and machete furnish two means of inciting industry on the part of the natives, but these do not comprise the entire arsenal of energy producers. An instrument similar to the Russian knout and known as a scourge is the badge of authority among overseers. Few natives whose regular pursuit is rubber gathering escape the scourge and many of them can show backs scarred and ridged, the result of blows that have broken the skin and eaten into the flesh. These are the practices which the British and the American governments are denouncing that Peru shall order abated even if troops have to be sent to the region where they are common.

In fairness to the overseers, however,

sealed over in three or four hours in the height of the season and in a day is the most sluggish part of the season. This means that new cuts and cupping have to be done each day.

After the milk is collected it is carried back to the camp and then coagulated on wooden paddles held over the smoke made by burning the mercury palm nut. A matured tree in the swamp will give an average of five gallons of milk during the season, which will coagulate into five pounds of raw rubber, valued at \$2.50 a pound in gold.

If the tree is carefully tapped it will give this yield for forty years without injury or cost of cultivation other than the collecting of the milk. If, however, the machete in the hands of a careless native or Indian penetrates the bark, exposing the wood of the tree, it speedily dies. A weevil called the *pundula* enters the wound made by the machete and eats right into the heart of the tree.

The ruthless slaying of the trees, which has resulted in so much cruelty on the part of the collectors, is encouraged by the town traders, who incite the natives to do the very thing for which they are likely to be maimed or killed if discovered at it. The idea on the part of the traders is that after the tree has been felled, instead of the forty cups which may tap it when it stands erect,

many slashes may be made along the whole line of the trunk, giving an enormous yield of milk during a few hours, although, of course, it means that that is the only yield it will ever give.

A tree grows to a height of 30 to 50 feet, with a straight trunk, nearly all the foliage being near the top. It is

covered with a rough bark, and it is here that the rubber producing milk is found. Covered by thin outer layers of the bark, small lacuna and streams of latex, or liquid rubber, which flows in a milky condition, circulate in a manner similar to blood in the veins of the human system. It is by tapping these that the

supply of the rubber milk is secured. The *Hevea* tree produces the highest grade of rubber, and these trees grow on lands which are overflooded several months in every year. This tree has a peculiar method of reproducing itself.

It reaches full maturity at about twenty years of age and throws out a nut or

seed which is discharged from the bough of the tree like a shot from a gun. The seeds fall into the water and are deposited by the stream along the shores, nature thus doing its planting without the aid of man.

The similitude to a gun is not limited to the discharge of the nut, for by some

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